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## CHESTER COUNTY CONNECTOR

# Public transportation giving residents more freedom, and is ready to expand

By Charles D. Perry  
The Herald

CHESTER — Someone stole Melvin Holmes' car on Easter last year.

For a while, it looked like the thief might have taken more than a senior citizen's Pontiac Bonneville.

Had it not been for the Chester County Connector — the county's only public transportation service that isn't a taxi — Holmes said he would have lost his job, too.

"I didn't have a way to get back and forth," said Holmes, 60, who lives in Chester but works in Rock Hill. "It's helped me tremendously because if that wasn't available, I wouldn't have been able to continue to work. I wouldn't have a way to get there."

The Connector was launched in July through Chester County Senior Services, a nonprofit organization that has been helping Chester folks for nearly 35 years. But the public transportation service kept a low profile until recently.

"We didn't want to be bombarded at first," said Michael Wessinger, executive director of Senior Services and supervisor of the Connector,

"because we didn't know what type of folks we would be taking where exactly."

For many years, the organization gave rides to senior citizens who needed them and helped people using Medicaid to get to their doctor's appointments.

But a few years ago, the organization realized people had transportation needs not covered by Senior Services' offerings, Wessinger said. So, the organization started charging a small fee for rides not covered by their programs.

After taking that first step toward public transportation, a group coordinated by the Catawba

Regional Council of Governments spent more than a year working with Senior Services to find out what transportation needs people had and how those needs could be met.

Last year, Senior Services received a grant worth about \$180,000. Nine months ago, the Connector took off, although the organization didn't publicize the service.

"The rationale behind it was, 'OK, let's start off kind of slow,'" Wessinger said. "Let's do a good job. Let's get people where they need to go on time. Let's try to do this efficiently from a financial standpoint. And then hopefully grow slowly each month.' So far, that's paid off."

In its first month, the service sold 237 one-way rides. But word has spread, and that number rose to 1,193 last month.

"It's been like a lifesaver to people like me," said Gail Lees, a Chester County resident who is confined to a power wheelchair.

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Jim Stratakos • The Herald

**Holmes talks about how he has ridden the Chester County Connector bus for seven months.**



## What is the Chester County Connector?

Chester County's only non-taxi public transportation service. Using a fleet of mostly 15-passenger vans and minibuses, the service picks up people from any place in the county and will transport them as far north as Charlotte or as far south as

Columbia. For questions about farther trips, please call the Connector to see if those needs can be accommodated.

## How do you get a ride?

To request a trip, people are asked to call the Connector office by noon the day before they want a ride. The hours of operation are 5 a.m. until 7 p.m. Monday through

Friday. The number is (803) 385-3838, Ext. 24.

## How much does it cost?

The fees are based on 5-mile increments. For example, a one-way trip of 1 to 5 miles costs \$1.50. A one-way trip of 5 to 10 miles costs \$2.50. Rock Hill is a \$3.50 trip. Charlotte and Columbia trips costs \$10 each.

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For several years, she has ridden a Senior Services vehicle through Medicaid to get to doctor's appointments. But activities such as going to eat with friends or shopping at the grocery store weren't options unless she asked someone for help, which she didn't like to do.

"It gives me a lot more freedom," she said.

The service also has helped Lynn Blackwell, a blind 44-year-old Chester man. Before he started using the service in July, he depended on family and friends to take him places, or he stayed home.

"It's really opened up a door for

me in being able to go places," he said. "It's long overdue."

Now the Connector is trying to spur its growth. Along with its pick-up service, Wessinger said the program is thinking about establishing an early morning route to Rock Hill sites such as Manchester Village or the Rock Hill Galleria, places where people can get access to CATS, the Charlotte bus system.

"We want to do two things," Wessinger said. "We want to connect the smaller communities within Chester County together. So that folks from Great Falls or folks from Richburg, if they have doctor's appointments in Chester, we want to connect them to what it is they need. And then, we want to be able to connect Chester County with the job markets in York Coun-

ty, the job markets in Mecklenburg County."

Around 9 a.m. Friday, a minibus pulled in front of the Rock Hill Business and Technology Center and dropped off Holmes, who works inside at the AARP Foundation helping seniors find jobs.

After his car was stolen last year — with no way of getting back and forth to work — he was forced to live with friends in Rock Hill during the week, then catch rides home on the weekend.

Without a change, he couldn't have kept working. That change was the Connector.

"I'm gonna ride that bus for a long time," he said.

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Melvin Holmes, 60, of Chester gets off the Chester County Connector bus at the Rock Hill Business Technical Center. Holmes depends on the bus to get to his job in Rock Hill after his car was stolen last year.